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ABSTRACT

This report examines experience of Moorhead State University (Minnesota) in attracting and retaining nontraditional, high-risk students through an alternative program called The New Center for Multidisciplinary Studies. The program's two-tier admission system represents an open-access concept offering an alternative way to begin college for students who do not meet full university admission requirements. Enrollment is limited both numerically and geographically. Program participants take standard and career-centered courses that explore problems or themes that cross subject lines, linking knowledge and insights from a variety of fields. Refresher courses are also available. Experience shows that the 30 to 35 percent attrition of program participants is slightly above the university as a whole over the past several years. A key ingredient of the program is the mentor/advisor component that guides students through the learning process, thus fostering a learning community atmosphere of students, faculty, and staff. It is felt that the Center's success resides in: (1) its attention to the subject in achieving academic success within a liberal arts atmosphere that develops contemporary skills and knowledge, and (2) the overall commitment of its faculty (all of which are tenured and hold rank in the university). Despite the persistent problem of having to justify itself, the Center continues to renew its curriculum, renew its faculty and its students. Contains five references. (GLR)

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Giving Beginning College Students a Chance for Success

A Report of a 20-Year Experiment with Non-Traditional Education in a University Setting

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Giving Beginning College Students a Chance for Success

The Report of a 20-Year Experiment with Non-Traditional Education in a University Setting

The non-traditional student is becoming increasingly visible on campuses across the country. Moorhead State University (Minnesota) was one of the early institutions to concern itself with the needs of older-than-average and other non-traditional students. The university's "New" Center for Multidisciplinary Studies is an innovative program with a 20-year record of success in supporting non-traditional students during their first two years in a college.

Part of a state college system, Moorhead State University is a comprehensive four-year institution with an enrollment of some 8,000 students. It offers more than 90 programs and majors that lead to baccalaureates, master's degrees or certification. The stated mission of this regional state university is:

> ...to provide academic programs of high quality in an educational environment that supports, in both students and faculty, intellectual and scholarly development, that develops the skills and talents of students, that gives them the capacity to live usefully and the desire to act responsibly, and that will make them learners all their lives. The dominant mission of the university is to facilitate teaching and learning that foster an openness to a range of ideas and human possibilities; to encourage and support research and artistic endeavors that identify the university as an intellectual and cultural center; and to serve as a resource for the application of knowledge that will enhance the quality of life in its service area. (The Bulletin, 1991)

Within this context, each year 250 non-traditional students are admitted through an alternative program called affectionately "The New Center." This program has sustained itself and has delivered its services for twenty years. During this time, the faculty has built up a fund of experiences and insights into undergraduate education that focus on alternative assessment, outcome based education, and teaching that addresses varied learning styles. The results of this twenty-year experiment are reported here.

A PROGRAM DESIGNED TO MEET A NEED

How the New Center Began

Based on a perceived need for increased accessibility to higher education, the New Center was initially established in response to the state legislature's directive that all students have available at least two years of college within a 35-mile radius of their homes. Thus Moorhead State University felt compelled to develop an alternative or open admission program for students who could not otherwise be admitted to the university. However, discussion made clear that in order to assure that students not be caught in a "revolving door," the program must be designed for success. In the fall of 1971, MSU's president, Roland Dille, proposed establishing the New Center program to meet four major goals:

1. to provide certain aspects of a community college for individuals within commuting distance of the university;

2. to provide selected career-oriented programs which require less than the baccalaureate degree and are not duplicated in the university service area;

3. to increase the humanizing aspects of career-oriented education;

4. to provide a new medium for experimental education at the university. (Dille, 1971)

Program approval processes were completed during the following spring, and a small grant for curriculum development was awarded by the Minnesota State College Board. A director for the program was hired, faculty members were recruited, and planning for the program began. The first 117 students were admitted to MSU's New Center for Multidisciplinary Studies in the fall of 1972. Given the extensive goals, limited planning time, and some scepticism expressed by colleagues, several problems were encountered during that first academic year. Many of the problems were systemic and tied to the uncertainty about programmatic goals. Other problems were related to the high expectations and time demands of a new program. Perhaps the miracle is that the program did not fold after one or two turbulent years, but instead continued to develop to its present state. That continued development is attributed to individuals (students, faculty, administrators, staff) who were committed to pursuing a successful program that provided academic opportunities to potential students within an open, meritocratic system.

Two major obstacles have had to be overcome throughout the development of the New Center. One is educating faculty, students, and administrators who assume that the program lacks academic credibility. The second is dealing with the general sense of ambiguity about program development and the program's relationship to the university community. Both of these "problems"

have been encountered over and over again in virtually all spheres of academic life and have led to continual reevaluation and strengthening of the program.

In their efforts to overcome these obstacles, the Center director and faculty gave special attention to curriculum planning and course development. Another part of the solution was to emphasize the academic credibility of the faculty. This included the requirement of a terminal degree and continued professional development both within each discipline as well as in the area of experimental education.

During the first several years of the program there was a major emphasis on course development. Courses had to be reviewed and approved by the appropriate university committees so they would be accepted as part of the required liberal studies program. Frequently when a new course was being reviewed, the entire New Center program--from its philosophy of education to its day-to-day functioning--had to be explained and re-explained. While this was often frustrating for the Center faculty, it did provide many opportunities to further define the program and to renew energies toward clarifying goals and objectives.

Currently the New Center program has a clearly defined curriculum that includes courses (which are often multidisciplinary) that contribute to students' liberal studies requirements (66%), other courses which are directed toward career education (38%), and developmental courses (which do not carry university credit)

designed to improve student's reading, writing and mathematical skills (6%).

After the first two years the New Center program began to grow and continued a growth pattern until an enrollment cap was established by the university in 1981. By 1975 there were 185-200 students enrolled in the center, by the fall of 1980 the enrollment was slightly more than 550, and currently (with an enrollment cap still in effect) new student enrollment averages 200 each fall quarter with 25 new students added during each subsequent quarter. The current enrollment in the program including new and returning students, is about 530, including both fulltime (390) and part-time students.

In addition to growth in numbers, the student body configuration has also changed. During the first five to seven years the students were fairly homogeneous, 18 or 19 years old, Caucasian, from rural or small town communities. All had experienced academic problems in high school. During the 1976-77 academic year a program review led to revision of objectives to include increasing the diversity of students served by the center. During the fall of 1977 an Educational Brokering Service started as an adjunct to the New Center that was part of a conscious movement toward increasing the number of older than average students. The major function of the Brokering Service was to facilitate the movement of community members into higher education. Additional changes aimed at increasing the number of minority students served by the center included the establishment of the White Earth Indian Reservation

Education program in 1979. This program significantly increased services for nearby American Indian students. As a direct consequence of these and other university efforts, students currently enrolled in the center are a more heterogeneous population.

The New Center has filled an important need for the University. By creating a de facto two-tier admission system, the New Center enables Moorhead State University to meet its open-access responsibilities as a people's college, and to do so in a responsible way. MSU has made careful and thoughtful provision for high-risk admittees, while at the same time shielding its traditional programs from the quality problems that a flood of such admissions could cause. Thus the university can pursue excellence, while maintaining its availability. Compared to other approaches, or non-approaches, this solution to high-risk admissions is far more honest and responsible. It takes a full and fair account of both individual and institutional needs, and places the university in a strong ethical position, for whatever future roles develop. Moorhead State University has clearly proven its concern for all the people of its service area, by its two decades of strong commitment to this center. And that gives the university a moral authority which is lacking in institutions that merely talk about their concern, or relegate it to small tacked-on programs.

The New Center Program

The New Center for Multidisciplinary Studies offers an alternative way to begin college. Students who may not meet full university admission requirements, but who reside within the MSU service region, may be considered for admission to the center. Enrollment in the center is limited both numerically and geographically. Once a student's application file is completed, the University Admissions Committee reviews all materials and determines whether to admit a student to the center or to deny admission. Students admitted through the New Center are those for whom surviving the usual pattern of instruction and advising may prove difficult.

The purpose of the center is to provide an integrated program of liberal arts and support courses for freshmen and sophomores. "Multidisciplinary" means that the courses link knowledge and insights from a variety of fields: English, natural sciences, global studies, social sciences, humanities, and communications. Moorhead State requires that one-third of all students' coursework be from these areas. Most courses offered by the New Center satisfy these requirements, but rather than limit study to one subject, or discipline, many of these specially designed courses explore problems or themes that cross subject lines.

The program isn't magical; it doesn't work for everyone. Between 30 and 35 percent of New Center freshmen leave by the year's end for academic or related reasons. That is slightly above the attrition rate for the university as a whole, which underscores

the fact that these are indeed high-risk admissions. Following are comparative attrition data for the university and the Center:

	F'86	F'87	F'88	F'89	F'90
University	25.2%	25.4%	24.5%	28.9%	28.9%
New Center	30.4%	36.1%	36.2%	32.2%	31.4%

These figures show the percentage of students who enrolled in fall and who did not return to MSU the next year. Put positively, this means that 69.6% of all New Center students did return for the sophomore year. Note, too, that the difference between the attrition rate for the university and the Center has grown closer together; for 1990 it is only 2.5%.

In counseling those who leave, the center's faculty takes the view that these persons have not "failed." Rather, they have explored a possible direction for their lives. They have had a fair chance at it, and learned that it is, for whatever reasons, no right, or perhaps just not yet right, for them. Some of these individuals have later returned to college, at MSU or elsewhere, and achieved academic success.

The experimental education component of the center focuses on devising a variety of learning experiences that assist students in identifying and pursuing educational and career goals. Multidisciplinary courses are designed to include two disciplines and to help stimulate students' interest in the liberal studies. These courses also expose students to the use of various discipline-based methods and perspectives that provide a context

for understanding ideas, concepts, or issues that are not confined to any single discipline.

The career education component of the center, once a more structured program providing a series of experiences (many off-campus), which culminated in an A.S. degree, now includes more of a balance between liberal studies and career preparation often leading to a B.S. or B.A. degree. The deemphasis on career focus in the center has come about as a result of: 1) the introduction into MSU's curriculum of career exploration classes by the Counseling and Personal Growth Center; 2) the changes in the world of work necessitating more oral and written communication skills in a service economy; and, 3) the competition for jobs in a faltering yet global economy which obliges students to be more academically prepared than in yesteryear. Thus, while the A.A. degree (liberal studies) is still offered by the university, the A.S. (vocational) degree no longer is; and, the majority of the center's students now transfer to the department of their chosen major to complete their baccalaureate degrees.

If students have a gap in their preparation or need a review in basics, the center also offers review courses in reading, writing and mathematics which do not carry college credit. The remaining forty-seven courses carry university credit and are fully transferable to MSU baccalaureate programs. Non-New Center students often take these courses for elective credit.

This experimental model includes a non-competitive grading system and the use of competency- or mastery-based learning approaches. The courses meet clear objectives delineated for each credit they carry; as students master these objectives, they earn the associated credits. Although students do not receive letter grades, they are expected to make steady progress toward educational goals. In order to be in good standing with both the center and the university, a student must complete at least seventy-five percent of the credits attempted. This approach has two positive consequences. One, students no longer compete with one another for higher grades; thus they are willing to work cooperatively to help each other achieve learning goals. A second consequence is that students can receive fewer than the total credits assigned to the course and still maintain a positive academic record of credits earned rather than a poor grade for the entire course.

The key ingredient leading to the success of this program is the advisor/mentor role that faculty are expected to assume with assigned advisees. The faculty advisor is responsible for offering students the typical academic advice for college success and also for helping students develop their own sense of education or career direction. In addition, faculty advisors help students bridge the gap between liberal studies education and career preparation. Advisors are also frequently asked by students to help them resolve some of their personal problems. The faculty advising role forms an important part of a support network for

students. Such support is necessary to help build students' academic skills and self-esteem.

The multidisciplinary courses and career-centered experiences offered by the center form the central links that foster the development of a learning community composed of students, faculty and staff. The sense of community is enhanced by everyone's interacting on a first-name basis, by including students, faculty and staff in the decision-making processes of the evolving program, and by sharing various social activities, e.g., potlucks and other parties. The resulting less formal atmosphere also encourages student-faculty interactions outside the classroom. In this community, interaction and learning go together.

WHY THE EXPERIMENT HAS WORKED

The mission of the center reflects that of the university as a whole. Its main intent is to provide educational experiences, grounded in liberal studies, through which students learn to integrate knowledge, skills and values. Although students who are selected for the program may lack certain skills and confidence in themselves, they have demonstrated potential to succeed. Thus, as active participants in the program they are encouraged to identify their goals and assess their strengths and weaknesses in order to make informed choices about degrees or other alternatives.

Underlying Philosophy and Tenets

In 1988, the faculty formally recorded the philosophy they had long employed in their teaching which states that:

> education should be holistic, empowering students to learn and to integrate knowledge, skills and values. It should assist students to appreciate their own and other's humanness and uniqueness, to discover the potentials of themselves and others, and to make choices which will help them to effectively and responsibly participate in their total environment. Education should enable people to successfully perform various social roles and to accept diverse cultures and life-styles. If should foster commitment to self, to others, and to life-long learning. (Corrick and Tammaro, 1992)

At the same time the faculty also identified the following basic tenets which remain today as a driving force of the program:

1. The wisdom of the past transmitted through the liberal arts and contemporary skills and knowledge are equally essential to higher education.
2. All individuals should have the opportunity to develop their potentials.
3. A person best develops knowledge, skills and appreciations when striving to improve upon successes.
4. Since learning styles vary among individuals, alternative routes to the goals of higher education should be made available.
5. When a supportive atmosphere and appropriate instruction are available, past performance in academic pursuits, as evidenced by high school grades or entrance examinations, is less significant for success in college than present commitment to learning.
6. Realistic understanding of abilities, motivations, interests and values increases the likelihood of progress toward goals and of personal satisfaction.
7. Integration of knowledge takes place within the learner; therefore, an instructional approach that places the student at the center and incorporates several disciplines is especially valuable.
8. Active learning produces meaningful, long-lasting effects upon behavior.

9. Understanding one's values and the values of others is an essential part of education.

10. Education should encourage responsibility to both self and society.

11. Holistic education should be life-long.

12. Individuals learn better in a setting where cooperation and esprit de corps make being a part of the community enjoyable and helpful.

13. Student/faculty interaction is an important factor in student motivation, involvement and retention and should be facilitated by on-going advising and opportunities for informal discussions. (Corrick and Tammaro, 1992)

The New Center Faculty

Just as the center is unique, so too, is its faculty. The staff of the center consists of five women and five men. Unlike the staffs of many learning centers, all have terminal degrees, are tenured, and hold rank in the university (five are full professors, three are associates and two are assistant professors). They are truly multidisciplinary in the sense that they are trained in a variety of disciplines: American studies, biology, higher education curriculum, English, educational psychology, physics, aeronautical engineering, applied mathematics, learning theory, educational administration, neuropsychology of reading, speech communication, oral interpretation of literature, American and British literature, and sociology. Full utilization of this wealth of knowledge allows the center to act much like a community college. Yet at the same time students are exposed to a cooperative, integrated, holistic, and multidisciplinary approach to learning.

Even though many of the faculty have had opportunities to return to the traditional realm of teaching, in the past sixteen years no one has chosen to do so. Half have served more than ten years; the "newest" two were hired six years ago when two faculty retired. It seems obvious that the great demands of time and emotional energy required by the program are far outweighed by the satisfactions gained. Not the least of these is a strong sense of collegiality and shared commitment to the success of the program.

The faculty are fully dedicated to the center and the method of acquiring knowledge that this mastery program represents. Faculty maintain an open door policy and a willingness to spend longer than usual hours, retesting, tutoring, and advising or simply listening. Beyond office hours they also share a commitment to foster the sense of community that is so vital to the program. The strong commitment to the idea that students come first makes the program labor-intensive, yet ironically, at the same time, cost-effective. This program is reported by the president and outside evaluators to be one of the least expensive on campus.

The center faculty is generally regarded as a hard-working and caring group, though that would be difficult to measure. No claim is made that they are X percent more hard-working or caring than the faculty of any other department. But there are some ways in which their jobs do differ from other departments' faculty, and those ways do have a tendency to increase the workload.

One significant aspect of their workload is student advising. Compared to faculty in most other departments, center professors tend to have substantially more advisees. One class, MDS 109, is taught by all center faculty and is designed to help students make a positive transition to the university as a whole. The course is meant to foster a collegial relationship between students and their advisors, and to enable students to begin the self-exploration and goal setting that is necessary if they are going to achieve their academic potential. All freshmen are required to take this course from their faculty advisor. Thus, every MDS 109 class that a faculty member teaches adds another 20-25 advisees. So, it's not uncommon for a New Center professor to have 50 or more advisees. And while some students may appear only at pre-registration time, there are others who come in frequently, with academic or with personal difficulties to discuss.

A second concern is that, despite that advising load, center professors, if they want to be retained or promoted, must meet the same expectations for scholarship, service to the university, and community participation that prevail in other departments. In order to secure long-term acceptance of the program by faculty across the campus, it may be even more important that those expectations be the same and that they be met.

A third area of responsibility involves internal work within the unit other than teaching and advising. Three or four faculty members serve on the Academic Progress Committee, which reviews

students' academic records and makes decisions about probation, suspension, and so on, a very time-consuming committee. Other faculty members assist the Students' Activities Committee which carries out special events, such as the Christmas Party, Spring Bash, and Soup Days that add to the supportive and cooperative tone of the center.

Considering all of these demands, it would be fair to say that compared to most faculty members in traditional departments, Center professors are immersed in their jobs and their students, more hours per week. It does take dedication. And while it can be very tiring sometimes, especially during advising season, it's very rewarding as well.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

A problem for the Center, notwithstanding its two decades of success, is the same problem any non-standard department or program encounters: the necessity to keep explaining and justifying itself to the larger university and system, a constantly changing institutional "public" which doesn't understand it very well. Any program which does not fit into the conventional departmental/subject matter grid of a university can run into this same problem. In the center's case, the problem has sometimes been exacerbated by the actual hostility of a few faculty in more traditional departments, faculty who see the center as some kind of debasement of the institution's standards. Perhaps the best long-term way to respond intramurally is simply

for the center faculty to serve on enough committees, and interact with enough faculty of other departments, for those faculty members to see that the Center's staff are professors-like-everyone-else. Some of the strongest supporters of the New Center are professors who have had children enrolled in the program, thus coming to know the purpose and processes of the Center.

Extra-murally, in the wider arena of a statewide system moving toward more centralized direction, the "problem of understanding" may require more formal and documented approaches. People making decisions in the state Capitol will need to be made aware of the circumstances of non-traditional programs like the New Center. As a system develops ways to stay in touch with non-traditional programs and their operations, then the "problem of understanding" should be readily solved.

At a time of diminishing enrollments and strained resources, it is important that the "access" mission of people's colleges like Moorhead State Univerity and its sister schools not be diminished by a misled notion of "economizing by excluding." That would be contrary to the mission of state universities, and certainly harmful to the long-term interests of any state's people and economy.

The New Center continues to meet the needs of non-traditional students at Moorhead State. Reviewed as a program in 1988, the

center was evaluated by the then Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Superior, Terrence MacTaggart, who wrote:

> As a person who regularly serves as a consultant evaluator for the North Central Accrediting Association to review programs such as this, and as one who has both initiated and managed such programs, I am confident in saying that Moorhead State's New Center is simply first-rate. Moorhead State has a widespread reputation for the quality of its liberal arts program and for its good service to students. These virtues are central to the New Center as well. (MacTaggart, 1988)

As it moves toward the end of a second decade, the Center for Multidisciplinary Studies continues to renew its curriculum, its faculty, and its students. Thus, it ensures that it will be forever the "New Center."

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